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**The Cognitive Campaign in Operation Guardian of the Walls: The Battle over the Narrative**

**Yoram Schweitzer, David Siman Tov, and Kobi Michael**

**As in every kinetic military campaign against Hamas and its allies in the Gaza Strip, the cognitive aspect was embedded from the very beginning of Operation Guardian of the Walls, and its importance increased as the campaign progressed. The integration of the cognitive campaign with the kinetic is essential for the realization of military achievements in order to then reap political gains. For Israel, the first cognitive achievement required is a deep engraving in the minds of Hamas commanders and their associates, as well as in the minds of the Gaza Strip population, of the growing and intolerable cost of the recent military venture and any rounds to come.**

Operation Guardian of the Walls saw Hamas's most intense use of military power since Operation Protective Edge. Heavy rocket barrages toward the Israeli civilian home front focused on massive "routine" rocket fire at the Gaza envelope communities and at cities in the south and center of the country, all introduced by the rocket fire toward Jerusalem on the opening day. In the most recent campaign, the severe damage to Hamas's military infrastructure and rocket production industry, in addition to the damage to significant parts of the underground infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, was accompanied by targeted and widespread damage to the commanders' offices and houses and the commanders themselves. It included the demolition of high-rise buildings used by Hamas in addition to the military infrastructure, to convey a deterrent message of exacting a personal and economic price from the organization's leadership.

**Hamas's Goals in the Cognitive Campaign**

It is important to understand Hamas's goals in this campaign in the internal Palestinian context – which, in Hamas's view, is related to the political and propaganda contexts vis-à-vis Israel and other target audiences and arenas relevant to the organization.

In the tensions that developed in Jerusalem during Ramadan, Hamas identified an opportunity to create a significant cognitive effect and to ignite several fronts simultaneously in order to position itself as the leader of the Palestinian national struggle and restore it to the regional and international agenda. Exacerbating the cracks between

Jews and Arabs in Israel, both at the social level and at the political level, is seen as a very important achievement – an achievement that was then leveraged to magnify the organization's influence capability and extend it to the regional level. These achievements are intended to shape cognition regarding inter-Arab unity and puncture Israel's strengthening regional status.

Hamas tried to position itself in a confrontation as the one that widened the deterrence equation with Israel by connecting Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, as the one that dared to issue an ultimatum to Israel and make good on its threats, as the one that managed to crack the fabric of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel and set off a wave of violence that significantly undermined the sense of security of the citizens of Israel, as the one that did not succumb to Israeli military power and rained rockets on population centers in Israel, which Israel was unable to prevent, and as the one that managed to stir up and agitate parts of the Arab world.

Had the campaign ceased in the first days, it is possible that Hamas's cognitive achievements would have carried weight. However, as the operation continued, and as the severe Israeli losses to the organization's military infrastructure and commanders increased and much infrastructure in the Gaza Strip was heavily damaged, the validity of Hamas's claim to military achievement was undermined. Diminishing Hamas's achievements of recent years in reconstruction and improved civilian life in Gaza may erode its domestic legitimacy and the international legitimacy it sought to establish as a responsible sovereign, and instead, strengthen its image (at least to several audiences, mainly in the West) as an unbridled terrorist organization that holds civilians hostage to its wild policies.

### **Israel's Goals in the Cognitive Campaign**

In order to undermine the rationale behind Hamas's belligerent rounds of escalation that have characterized relations between Israel, Hamas, and the Gaza Strip over the past decade, Israel sought to exact a physical toll from Hamas and its supporters that would also be deeply etched in their minds and weaken their readiness to pay such a heavy price in the future. In addition, Israel sought to send a message to Hamas that despite the barrages of rockets launched at Israeli cities, its military campaign did not achieve its purpose, and furthermore, its strategy of an underground secured safe heaven was badly crippled. Another message is the futility of developing resource-intensive projects that are destroyed in every round of fighting that Hamas launches in the face of Israel's clear military and technological superiority, which readily exacts a heavy toll in the face of indiscriminate attacks on its civilians.

Beyond that, the massive destruction throughout the Gaza Strip during the conflict with Israel underscored to Gazans that Hamas has caused the area to regress significantly. To the Palestinians in the West Bank living under the Palestinian Authority, it should be clear that Hamas has sustained a severe blow to its military capabilities and thus to its political stance, and that the challenge it poses to the PA's dominance in the territories and Jerusalem has been weakened in the wake of the recent campaign.

The attack on the "metro" – the system of underground tunnels – appears to be one of the most important cognitive moves in the operation, both in disrupting the organization's strategic infrastructure, damaging its immunity, and creating a sense of infiltration among its operatives, and in conveying a message to other terrorist organizations that use the underground space that it is not immune to attack. The destruction highlights the futility of the enormous force buildup efforts invested by the organization (at the expense of Gaza's civilians) and at the same time its inability to defend itself against Israel.

In the international arena, Israel conveyed that Hamas is the aggressor that planned and launched this campaign and that it acts as a terrorist organization in every way and blindly directs its weapons at the civilian population. Moreover, Israel emphasized that since its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, Hamas has preferred military armament and harm to Israel over civilian welfare and development. Israel also clarified that rocket fire or terrorism against its citizens is unacceptable, just as it is unacceptable in any country in the world.

Beyond the direct cognitive discourse with Hamas, the campaign in Gaza sent a deterrent message to Hezbollah, demonstrating IDF capabilities (emphasis on intelligence and precision fire, willingness to use destructive force that is far greater than what the opponent possesses, including in the underground space). Another message was conveyed to Arabs in Israel and to Palestinians in the West Bank, some of whom may have pinned their hopes on Hamas as the leader of the Palestinian national struggle. Hamas's failure in the military campaign may undermine the hopes of that extremist minority that was enticed by the organization.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Hamas's cognitive achievements in the early days of the campaign were significant, but their weight over time is in question. For example, despite Hamas's initial success in linking rocket fire toward Jerusalem and the flare-up between Jews and Arabs in East Jerusalem, shifting the focus of the campaign to the Gaza Strip overshadowed the linkage it sought to create between the two arenas.

The outbreak of violence between Jews and Arabs in Israel was influenced by the escalation initiated by Hamas, but it is likely also the outgrowth of deep currents in Arab society, fueled by a combination of issues of identity, frustration, crime, incitement, and lack of leadership. In Israel, much effort has been channeled to locate those who incited the violence, including among the extreme Jewish minority, as part of the main effort to alleviate the tension between the two populations and to sever the connection that Hamas sought to establish with the outbreak of the war in Gaza. The tactical achievements of Hamas's "surprise attack" were also reversed, once it was surprised by the demonstration of Israeli power and Israel's willingness to launch a large-scale campaign against everything perceived by Hamas as an asset, including high-rises, luxury houses in the Rimal neighborhood, and financial institutions, along with the razing of the organization's military infrastructure.

Hamas's attempt to portray the campaign in Gaza as an element that engulfed the Lebanese and Syrian arenas was neutralized by Hezbollah's careful and meticulous behavior, which avoided direct involvement in the fighting and contented itself with statements encouraging the "Palestinian struggle against the predatory occupier" from Iran and the Shiite-affiliated militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, while allowing sporadic rocket fire from Lebanon and Syria and the UAV infiltration attempt. Moreover, Hezbollah and Iran have closely watched Israel's kinetic ability, determination, and intensity, which relayed a clear cognitive message as to Israel's willingness to pursue an extremely high-intensity aggressive policy in response to rocket fire into its territory.

In the long term, the following lessons should be emphasized:

- a. Attack on the media building in Gaza: During the campaign, the al-Jalaa building was demolished – a site that in part was used by international media (AP and al-Jazeera). The attack on the building evoked media shockwaves and sharp international criticism. Israel's statement that the attack was essential due to intelligence that Hamas had used the building remained vague (at least in the media). Therefore, if possible, it is essential to reveal intelligence about Hamas's use of the building, and in the future, to manage events that have the potential to provoke international resentment in similar fashion.
- b. Preventing the entry of foreign journalists into the Gaza Strip as a lesson from previous operations in the Gaza Strip (Cast Lead) subjects Israel to sharp criticism by the world media, and is interpreted as an attempt at concealment. Foreign media should be allowed, while taking care to protect the lives of the journalists, because the images of destruction and killing in the Gaza Strip are published anyway and override Israel's public diplomacy.
- c. Need for a "national spokesperson": Although there has been an improvement in the work of the Foreign Ministry and the IDF Spokesperson's Unit vis-à-vis the

international arena (briefings, articles, and activities on social media), as well as coordination between the relevant parties, the lack of a "national spokesperson" for both the Israeli target audience and the global target audience is noticeable. As a lesson for the future, a national information and cognition apparatus must be established.

- d. Strengthening Israeli presence on social networks: The moves in the diplomatic arena led by the Foreign Ministry afforded Israel some success. However, it seems that the digital realm, in which Israel's rivals in the world have an apparent advantage, requires special organization and encourages the harnessing of civil society in Israel and around the world as a force multiplier.